

## Review in January 2008 NSS News

*50 Years of Texas Caving*. Carl E. Kunath. A&K Enterprises, San Angelo, Texas; 2007. 8.5 by 11 inches, 526 pages, hardbound. \$50. (Order from the author at 3720 Ransom Road, San Angelo, Texas 76903. Add \$5 for U.S. surface shipping. For other postage, ask [carl.kunath@suddenlink.net](mailto:carl.kunath@suddenlink.net).)

Wow! Five hundred pages. Six hundred illustrations. Two hundred thousand words. Nearly five pounds of heavy, coated paper in a hard cover. Could this be a fifty-dollar book that is actually worth fifty dollars?

This book nominally covers the period from 1951 through 2000, but there are some notes from earlier years, and some data from later years appear in tables and elsewhere, including a short epilog. The main chronological section contains year-by-year summaries of two or three pages each. Then there are capsule histories of the sixty-nine Texas caving groups that have existed over the years. Next is a Serious Side section covering things like cave science and conservation, Texas cavers' work in Mexico and New Mexico, cave diving, and accidents and fatalities. A Lighter Side section describes famous parties and recounts humorous tales about things like vehicular misadventures. Finally there is a long section with histories of Texas's ten greatest caves and one cave in Mexico with which Texas cavers have been heavily involved, especially in restoration.

The book is to some extent organized around the history of the Texas Region of the NSS, now called the Texas Speleological Association. The amount of research is impressive, with information from the *Texas Caver*, the archives of the TSA and the Texas Speleological Survey, and many interviews and other sources. Jerry Atkinson wrote a lot of the groups section, and some others contributed portions of the book, notably in the science chapters. Interesting old letters are quoted or reproduced.

The illustrations include about 375 photos, two-thirds of them in color. The colors in some of the older photos look a bit faded, but generally the photographs are well printed. A wide net was cast for photos, and we see such things as a yearbook photo of the 1958 members of the Kerrville Speleological Society at the Schreiner Institute (now Schreiner University, where the International Congress of Speleology will be held in 2009). Especially noteworthy are photographs in the greatest caves section, many by the author. There are cartoons scattered throughout, and the other drawings, many in color, include things like posters and newsletter covers. A few of the photos and cartoons have been childishly censored, even to the extent of digitally amputating a middle finger that would have been a whole eighth of an inch long on the page.

I had read snatches of the book as I was doing the final page layout following the author's specifications. Before writing this review, I borrowed a set of unbound press proofs while the finished books were on their way from China, thinking that I really ought to read some more of it before I wrote a review. I ended up reading the whole thing straight through. In doing so, I noticed a few redundancies, but this might actually be a good thing, because I imagine most readers will skip around in the book, picking out the parts most interesting to them and, perhaps, never quite getting around to the history of the Central Catholic High School Grotto (1972–1973). While, inevitably, I could quibble with the punctuation here and there, the grammar is exceptional, and everything reads smoothly. I noticed one clearly typographical error in the whole book. (I believe Jerry Atkinson deserves much credit for proofreading, too.) In these respects, this book must be in the top percent or so of cave books.

Carl Kunath is a bit of a curmudgeon, and it doesn't take a very close reading to see that he thinks Texas caving, and the Texas Speleological Association in particular, have gone all to hell since the good old days. To some extent, he is justified. Certainly there haven't been any recent discoveries like Caverns of Sonora or Natural Bridge Caverns, which became two of the country's top show caves. The main responsibilities of the TSA, the *Texas Caver* and the annual spring conventions, have been hit or miss. He doesn't give much credit for the more popular, if unofficial, Texas Caver Reunions that have been held faithfully for the past thirty years. The book seems to be best about the earlier times, when Kunath was himself more involved and knew most of the smaller number of active cavers. Of course, the older days will be most interesting to the reader, too, because they are less familiar to most of us. Kunath also tends to assess the quality of grottos based on their esprit de corps and whether they celebrate their anniversaries, rather than the actual activities of their members. I suppose that is a natural bias in a historian.

I don't expect to live to see another history of an NSS region as good, or even as extensive, as *50 Years of Texas Caving*. The answer to the question in the first paragraph is yes.—Bill Mixon